

# ANCIENT HAIR STYLES OF INDIA





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by  
*Ila Palchoudhuri*

*Rupa & Co.*

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*for demonstrating the modern adaptations of ancient Indian hairstyle.*

*My sincere thanks to 'Kabari' for visualising and executing the modern adaptations.*



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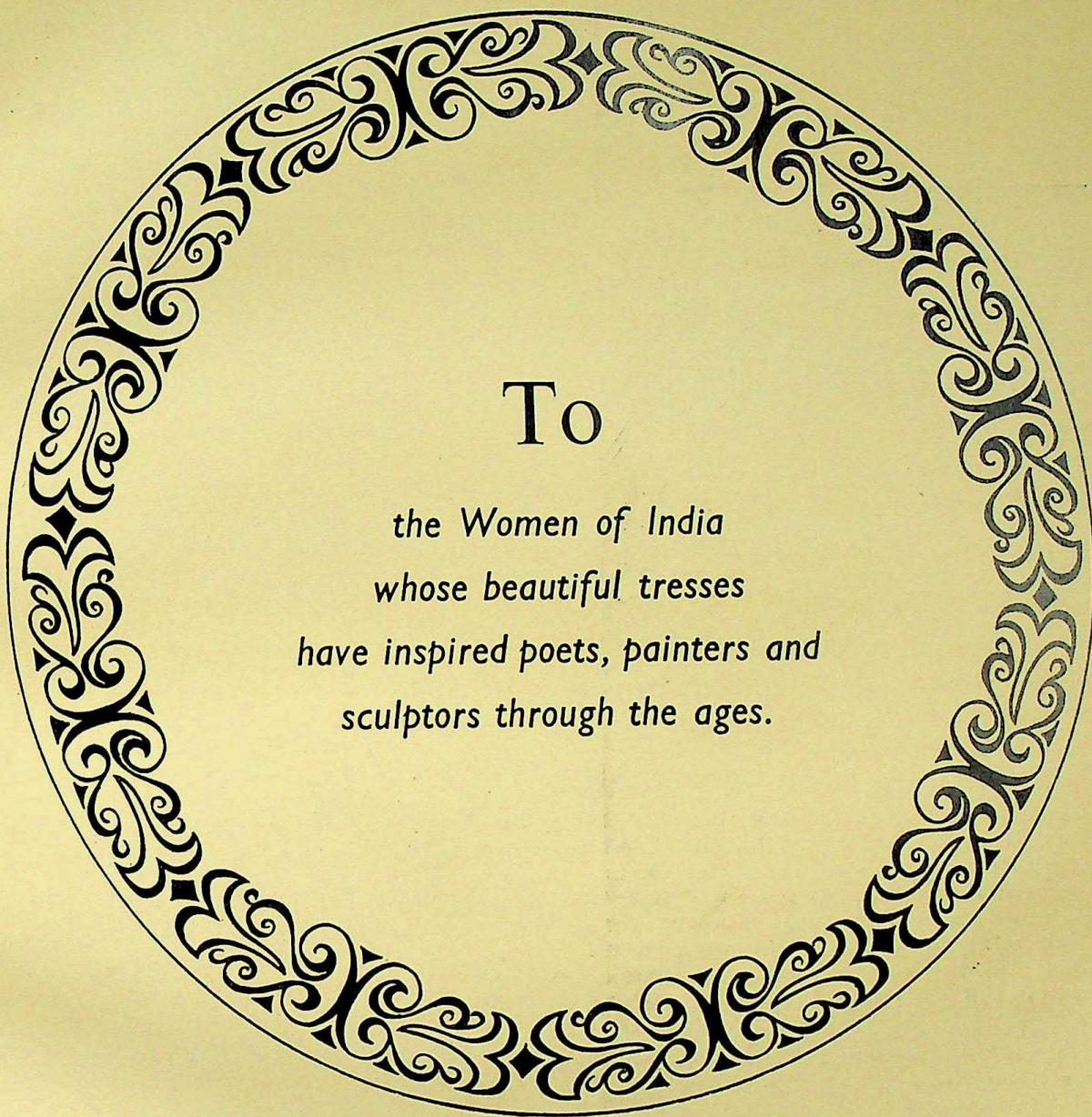
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To

*the Women of India  
whose beautiful tresses  
have inspired poets, painters and  
sculptors through the ages.*



## About the Author



Ila Palchoudhuri has been prominent in public life for three decades. She was a member of the 1st, 2nd and 4th Lok Sabha and gained the reputation of an outspoken parliamentarian. She has served in various capacities on numerous official and non-official boards, committees and organisations—many of them of national and international importance. In spite of her extremely busy schedule she has never grudged time to serve educational and welfare organisations in her home district of Nadia, West Bengal and India.

Ila Palchoudhuri has travelled widely mostly as a parliamentary delegate or a special invitee of foreign governments. Her itinerary has included : Afghanistan, (UN Seminar on Human Rights in Developing Countries), Australia, Bulgaria, Burma, Ceylon, China, Czechoslovakia, England, France, Germany (W), Hongkong, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Poland, Rumania, Singapore, Sudan, Thailand and U. A. R.

She speaks Bengalee, English, Hindi and Nepalese and has written many articles, which have been widely published in India. They touch various aspects of the life of the people.

It is only natural that with her background and attainments she is deeply interested in our cultural heritage. In her few leisure hours she has compiled the illustrations and written the text for this monograph.

Her subject is very close to the heart of every woman.

This book should surely find a niche in the personal library of every woman, artist and lover of art, whether it be in the East or West, for it expresses the beauty of India and her ancient culture.



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## FOREWORD

This beautifully produced book with its wealth of illustrations gives an artistic expression to one aspect of Indian life and culture. Indian decorative art of the late medieval period is something unique in its sophisticated beauty, and the art of women's hair-do also falls within this category. From our sculpture and painting for the last 2000 years and more, we see this artistic adventure in the delineation of women's coiffure, and the styles get more and more complicated as the centuries pass. Ila Palchoudhuri has taken up the study of this, and she has tried to see old and medieval styles in actual practice by getting a number of beautiful young ladies who are proud of the woman's crowning glory act as models in the illustrations of old hairstyles. The result has been this book, which apart from its documentary value is quite a handsome artistic production, for which all lovers of art in India and abroad will feel grateful to Ila Palchoudhuri. She has also discussed the historical background of the matter.

Calcutta,  
12 August, 1973.

*Sumit Kumar Chatterji*



# Ancient Hairstyles of India and their adaptations

নীরব নিশা তব চরণ নিছায়ে  
আঁধার কেশভার দিয়াছে বিছায়ে।

*"Nirab nisha taba charan nichhaye  
Andhar kesh var diachhe bichhaye."*

"The silent night spreads the wonder of her dark tresses under the shadow of Thy feet."

Thus sings the great poet Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. The beautiful hair of the Indian women has inspired poets and sculptors; it has influenced literature and folk-lore.

The intricate art of hair-dressing, can be seen on temple carvings, friezes and wall paintings all over India.

Folk-art has been the origin and source of inspiration through the centuries. Classical art has developed and flourished but its connection with folk-art can yet be traced in many cases. The Epics and Puranas gave the ancient sculptors a vast panorama of living pictures that could be translated from verse or prose into carvings on stone. The whole pantheon of Gods and Goddesses provided infinite imaginative scope full of reverence and beauty.

Folk-art is a word that has been recently coined. From the beginning of time 'Art' itself was expressed in the natural craving of man to beautify his surroundings and himself through what we now term 'Folk-art.'

The primitive woman adorned herself; the primitive man not only adorned himself, but also took considerable trouble and faced danger to get the bright plumage of birds or the fur of the wild animals to adorn and clothe the woman of his choice.

Uninhibited, the simple Adivasi woman looked at a pool of water in the heart of the forest and saw her own reflection. She unconsciously stretched her hand, plucked a red forest-flower and placed it in her hair. Her lips curved in joyous laughter, and her man found her beautiful.

From these simple origins and longings sprang the desire to beautify the little home, to weave coloured grasses and make hand and head ornaments, to weave the mats that were used, in various patterns, till time passed and folk art took a definite shape, rich with colour and romance.

A significant feature of our age is the increasing awareness of the priceless treasures hidden in the folk-art and folk-craft of our country. The life of the village community centres round religious and social beliefs and customs, and is reflected in a variety of objects of worship and articles of daily use.

Festivals—religious, social and seasonal—relieved the monotony of daily existence. The peoples' imagination found expression in diverse forms of beauty. Gods and Goddesses, family Deities made of clay or carved in stone, became living stories of the Puranas and found a homely expression that was familiar to the child from birth. The sheets he used had beautiful designs. When he was older, the covers that covered him and his bed had the images of Krishna, Shiva, Parvati, and pictures of episodes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata on them. Out of the storehouse of Nature and from the creative urge of the people emerged a rich and forceful art.



With the shift to urban and industrial civilisation much of this rich heritage was lost and neglected. With the introduction of the machine, the personal touch vanished and mass-produced cheap goods flooded the country. As far back as 1880, Sir George Birdwood wrote, "In India everything is hand-wrought and everything down to the cheapest toy or earthen vessel is, therefore, more or less a work of art."

Folk-art depicts the life and professions of the various States of India. In Gujarat and Saurashtra, we find 'Jaladevi' worked on bed coverings and household drapery. The people were sea-faring people and hence their prayers were to 'Jaladevi.' "She who knows the ways of the waves, the currents of the seas, and the flight of the birds—may She bring our vessels back safely." The long-haired women of Gujarat floated 'chirags' on the sea and prayed for the safety of their sons, husbands and brothers, as the lighted 'pradeeps' floated away dancing on the waves, like star-particles. The sea-faring history of India is written in these beautiful works of folk-art. The temple sculptures of India have found their inspiration in the simple lines of the religious 'Alpana' that are thousands of years old.

On the 'Nag-Panchami' day, intricate patterns were drawn—with the Snake motif.

From these have come to life the many beautiful sculptures of the 'Nag Kanyas' on temples: enchanting, vigorous, lethal, their hair in intricate coils, their sinuous bodies entwined in strange poses, their faces aglow with life.

This is Indian art based on tradition inspired by the epics, with all the developing vigour of living art.

The Indian child laughs happily, and feels the beauty of the little toy horses of Gujarat and Bankura and the camels of Saurashtra.

Indian children smile, their dark eyes bright with joy, as they hear the little tinkling bells on the camels; they sit on brightly coloured swings and play, while the coloured tassels sway gaily.

Handicrafts and folk-art of India have evolved their own idiom in every State and have their own character.

Come to the temples of South India, Khajuraho, Konarak, Mount Abu, Bhubaneswar, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Saurashtra, Assam and West Bengal and look round them. Their beauty will leave you speechless.

The hairstyles, which I have tried to focus, will interest every woman, whether Eastern or Western. A complete sense of perfection will be experienced.

To feel the pulse of India, her temples must be seen and studied.

I have dwelt on hairstyles, but there is much else to see and observe. The fabulously beautiful jewellery, the suggestion of the intricate and artistic clothing, the supple dance poses on which the whole art of Indian classical dancing is based, will all come to have a deeper meaning if seen with understanding and vision.

Life in all its aspects has been depicted. Domestic and rural scenes, panels of war and splendour, ecstatic moments of love in all its phases, have been brought to life with passion and vigour.

The 'Nayakas', the 'Surasundarees' — the divine attendants — the 'Yakshinis' and 'Yakshas' — all play their part and impart beauty. No detail is forgotten. A thousand and one ways of dressing the hair—all beautiful and perfect; the ornaments of ravishing design, and over all, the radiant health and vigorous life flowing through the limbs of the Gods and Goddesses and their attendants have to be seen — to be really appreciated. They must be seen in their own setting. Pictures can hardly do them justice — but some of the drawings in this book, I hope, will bring them to life. The beauty of Indian sculpture is like the beauty of India herself: majestic in her snow-capped mountains, flowing in her rivers and inviting in her green fields and forests. The seas blue and soft—that can turn turbulent and stormy. Indian art and sculpture reflect India in all her charm and moods.



**1 Wall Painting on Rock, Ajanta  
(5th Century)**

The Ajanta Rock Paintings have kept people enthralled for centuries. The Wall Painting in Cave II — is exquisite. The eyes of the 'Nayika' are expressive and look out with a strange loveliness at posterity. The scent of the flower—a lotus? A 'Shirish'? Who can be sure! The perfume must have been there, for you can almost feel the figure in the painting inhaling the perfume. Is it fancy or reality, that in this cave a faint aroma seems to linger, of flowers and incense of past glory and beauty.

The hair style is ornate yet soft, the jewellery can hardly be bettered even to-day !









**2 Scene of Dance and Music, Mahadeo Temple,  
Harsagiri, Rajasthan (961-973 A.D.)**

Come and see the friezes of dance and music in the early hours of the morning at Mahadeo Temple. They will leave you speechless with wonder. The figures are lively and seem to move in a rhythmic wave. The dress, jewellery and hairstyle are novel. The modern adaptation, as will be seen, can be equally effective.









**3 Cymbal Player, Surya Temple, Konarak, Orissa  
(about 1238-64 A.D.)**

Orissa in her temples has rich stores of beauty. The friezes sometimes cover a whole wall—where various musical instruments are depicted. The female figures, heavenly and beautiful have supple poses. This cymbal player looks happy and inspired, and her hairstyle has inspired the modern adaptation—on which variations, with flowers and ornaments are possible.











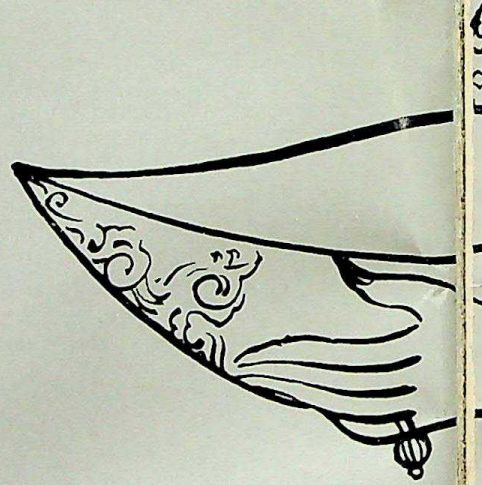




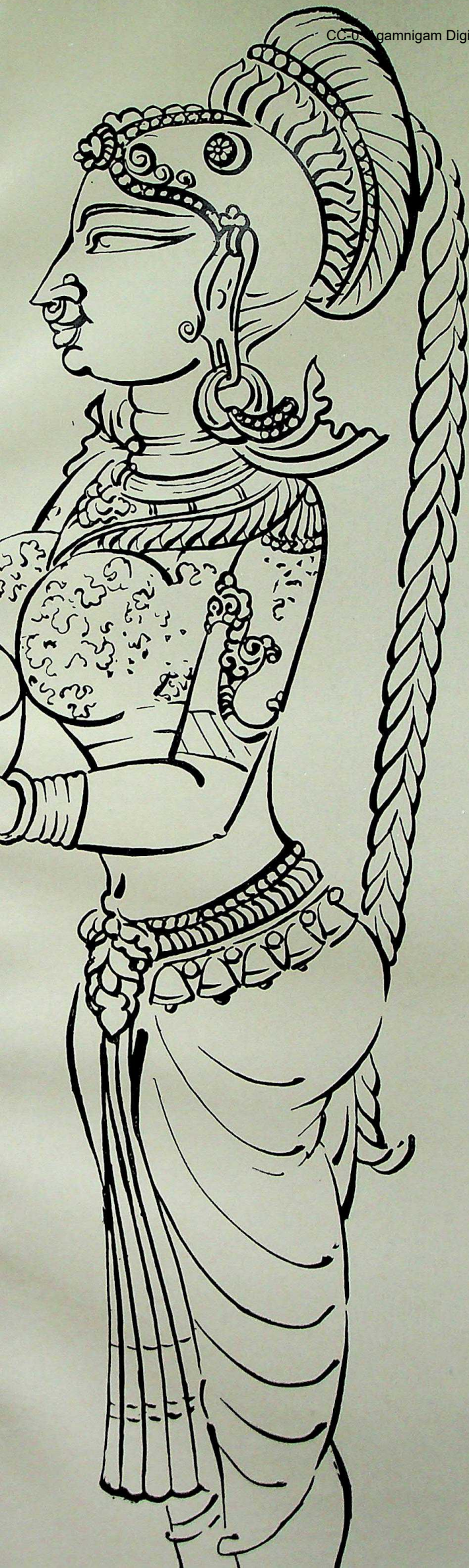
**4 Sporting Yaksha with Bird,  
Rajiva Lochana Temple,  
Rajim, MP. (7th-8th Century)**

Come with me to the Rajiva Lochana Temple, Rajim, Madhya Pradesh. See the lower-most part of the panel of the South Door of the 'Mandapa'. It dates as far back as the 7th/8th century. The sporting 'yaksha' on the panel is breathtakingly beautiful. The 'yaksha' can be seen, full of fun and frolic. The hairstyle would look beautiful as a modern adaptation—provided the personality is suited to the style.









##### **5 Dipa Lakshmi (Lamp Bearer), South India (8th Century)**

The Dipa Lakshmi or the lamp-bearer from South India dating back to about the 18th century can be seen in many temples of South India. The 'Chirag' when lit, lights up the face of Dipa Lakshmi with a strange unearthly beauty. The heavy scent of sandalwood and incense fills the air and chanting becomes strangely sonorous with the Dipa Lakshmi lamps lighting the face of the lamp-bearer and the priests in their red silk dhotis, while the flames of the religious fire, "Homa", leap and dance.

The modern adaptation can highlight the long dark 'veni' of the Indian woman giving her a beauty that is not of this world! Ornaments and scented flowers are part of this hairstyle.









#### **6 Traditional Odissi Dance Pose, Orissa**

The traditional dance pose of Odissi from Orissa is graceful and exquisite. The pose is a mixture of moods — and what does it depict? Invitation? Joy? Grace and glamour? Probably all—for it gladdens the eye and leaves a happy nuance in one's mind.

The hairstyle, simple and neat, can give rise to very happy adaptations and variations for the modern woman. Beauty, joyous and vital, can be re-captured, if we have eyes to see, and the mind to perceive.









#### **6 Traditional Odissi Dance Pose, Orissa**

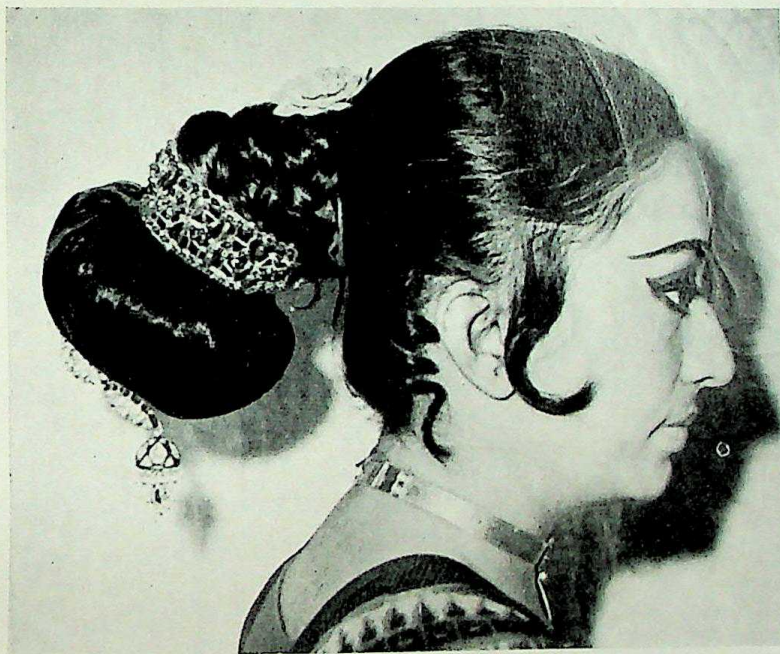
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**7 Vimala Vasahi, Adinath Temple, Dilwara,  
Mount Abu, Rajasthan, (1031 A.D.)**

Vimala Vasahi from Adinath Temple Dilwara, Mount Abu, Rajasthan is a drum player! She is about to beat the drum. The whole movement has been beautifully caught by the sculptor.

The modern adaptation of the hairstyle would look just as beautiful to-day. But can we recapture the elegance of the pose—the liveliness and the radiant health of the figure?







## 8 Nagini, Bhubaneshwar, Orissa

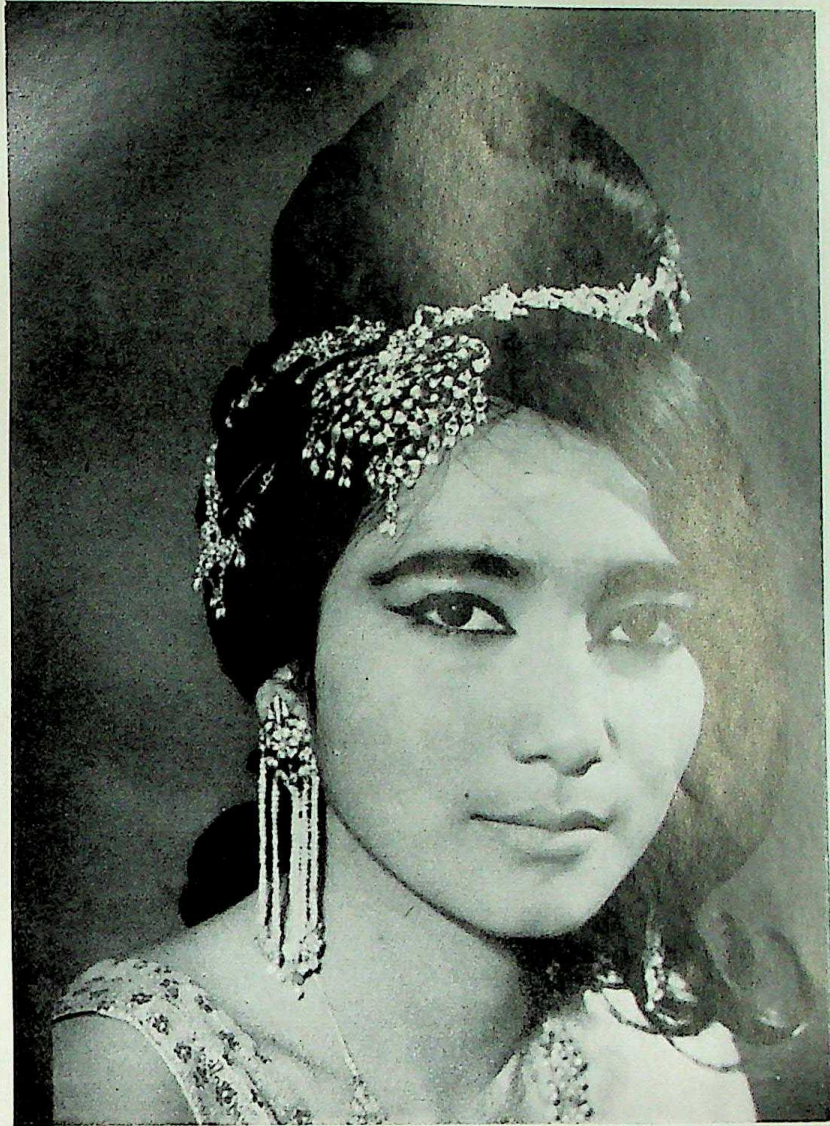
From Bhubaneshwar in Orissa come the sculptures of the Nag Kanyas and Naginis—fierce, full of life—their long 'veni' proclaiming their luxuriant hair. In their moments of passion and play, there is no softness for human frailty. The pulsating rhythm runs fearlessly through the sculptured figures. The hairstyles though they look intricate, can be adapted in many ways for the modern trends effectively.











**9 The Apsara, Ajanta Cave XVII,  
(5th Century)**

The Apsara in Cave XVII at Ajanta—dating back to the 5th century—has eternal beauty. Her lovely face and eyes—as if looking from the air, looking on the earth with the promise of happiness, have enchanted the world.

It would need courage to adapt the hairstyle for modern times; but if adapted, the style could look exquisite on a young girl.

The exotic jewellery, pearls and precious stones speak of an affluent India. The “fly-away” hair ornament gives the unmistakable impression of the “apsara” skimming across the skies.



#### **10 Uma, South India, (12th Century)**

Many of our art treasurers have found their way abroad. This priceless sculpture of Uma from South India adorns the Boston Museum.

A modern adaptation from this hairstyle could be spectacular for formal occasions. This style would stand judiciously chosen oriental ornaments or a single exotic flower. It would lend height and formality to any outfit—and make even an average head of hair look attractive and almost divine.







**11 Apsara holding Lotus, Visva Brahma Temple,  
Alampur, South India, (8th Century)**

“Attendant divinities” have been executed by the ancient temple sculptor with as much finish and attention as the ‘divinities’ themselves, in the Viswa Brahma Temple—Alampur, South India. It dates back to the 8th century.

Here is a heavenly attendant—her appreciation of the lotus and all beautiful things of life is very apparent and captivating. It will be noticed she is holding the “heart” of the Lotus—symbolising the inner radiance of all beauty.

The hairstyle in this case lends itself admirably to modern adaptation. The hair ornaments can utilise the South-Indian ‘Thiriguppu’ effectively, if used on this hairstyle in modern times.







**12 Naika, Nandi Mandapa, Virupaksha Temple,  
(740 A.D.)**

Hairstyles of great beauty accompany many love poses in Indian sculpture. Come to the east face of the Nandi Mandapa, of the Virupaksha Temple (about 740 A.D.). There you will stand spell-bound when you see the embracing couple. The ornaments and hair-style are imaginative and perfect.

Here is a style that could have a very successful modern adaptation. The ornament, if made of gold or silver would enhance the beauty of dark tresses—and the little 'tikli' hanging on the forehead could have, if desired, beautiful stones. As a bridal hair-style it would be very lovely.









**13 Saraswati, Goddess of Learning,  
Chakreswara Temple, Sopara near Bombay,  
(11th Century)**

Saraswati—from Chakreswara Temple, Sopara near Bombay. A long vista of years stretching, to the 11th century. How complete every detail is! The calm composure of the Goddess of Learning, carrying her 'Vina' has been depicted in all its splendour. The hairstyle is ornate, and can easily be adapted for the modern hairstyles giving height and dignity.









*Traditional Bride of Bengal*



**14 Traditional Projapati (Butterfly)  
Khompa, Bengal**

The traditional hairstyles of Bengal can hardly be equalled for their simplicity, and artistry. The bridal hair-dressing in Bengal shows great beauty, combined with flowers and ornaments, and the old folk song comes to life.

“The father gave her golden bangles  
and bags full of rice —  
The mother braided her hair with flowers,  
above any price —  
The ornaments may cost a fortune —”

But what can be the price of the love of the  
mother braiding the daughter's hair when she  
is to be married !







**15 Mithuna and Surasundari, Kali Devi Temple, Khajuraho**

The 'Surasundari' from Kali Devi Temple Khajuraho, dates back to the 11th century. The style is from the figure of the 'Surasundari' the heavenly damsel, in the ecstatic moments of love depicted on the walls. Devoted to Mithuna and the joyful moments of love. Love Divine and passionate pulsating with life. The object of passion has been depicted with perfection in every detail. The ornate hairstyle suits the type of her face and would also suit a young Indian mother if duly adapted to her modern environment.









### Mother and Child

The very core of the beauty of life.  
The mother holding the future generation in her arms.  
What better promise is there for humanity !  
Kabiguru Rabindra Nath Tagore has described the  
mother thus —

“মা, তোমায় দেখে দেখে  
আঁখি না ফিরে !  
তোমার দুয়ার আজি খুলে গেছে  
সোনার মন্দিরে ॥  
তোমার মুক্ত কেশের পুঞ্জ মেঘে  
লুকায় অশনি,  
তোমার আঁচল বলে আকাশ তলে  
রৌদ্র বসনী ॥”

“Ma tomay dekhey dekhey  
Ankhi na firey  
Tomar duar aji khuley gachhay  
Sonar mandirey  
Tomar mukta kesher punja meghey  
Lukai ashani,  
Tomar anchal jholey akash taley  
Roudra-basani”

“Mother we cannot take our eyes away from your beautiful face  
You have opened your doors to all that is beautiful  
In the dark clouds of your hair are hidden the weapons of destruction  
Your 'Sari' is of the colour of golden sunlight  
Mother we cannot take our eyes away from your face !”



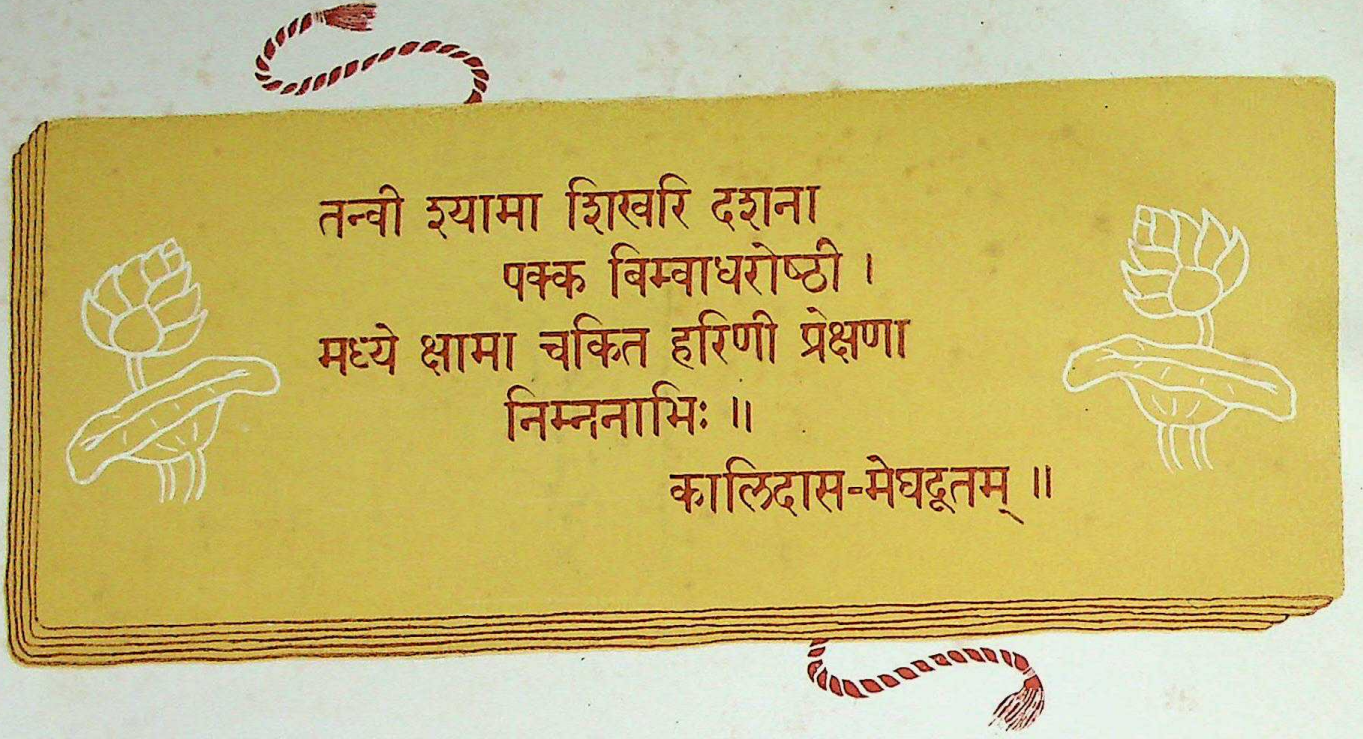


*This hairstyle has been taken from an ancient Indian sculpture of Parvati, and it can be seen — how well it can be adapted to-day.*

*This hairstyle has been adapted from old sculptures and also from the Naga Hills. The lustrous dark hair of the Indian women looks beautiful with her shining braids. This style would also look lovely, on the western woman with her golden hair.*







तन्वी श्यामा शिखरि दशना  
पक्क बिम्बाधरोष्ठी ।  
मध्ये क्षामा चकित हरिणी प्रेक्षणा  
निम्ननाभिः ॥  
कालिदास-मेघदूतम् ॥

*"Tanwi shyama shikhari-dasana*

*Pakka-bimbadharosthi*

*Madhye kshama chakita-harini-prekshana*

*Nimna-navi"*

*Kalidasa : Meghadootam*

Kalidasa in his immortal Meghadootam has  
described the beauty of the Indian Woman —

*"She is slim and dark*

*With beautiful teeth, and lips like  
the ripe 'bimba' fruit*

*Slim-waisted, and her glance*

*Like unto that of a startled doe"*

*Kalidasa : Meghadootam*



















